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## LIBRARY WORK IN THE OPEN COUNTRY

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It became apparent years ago to students of the country life problem that some means must be devised to make books available in rural districts. It was evident that the country boy and girl, man and woman, to compete with the city boy and girl, man and woman, must have to an extent the same social and educational advantages. Books seemed to be the greatest need. Without them the country churches were not thriving, there could be no study clubs, debating societies, reading circles or women's clubs, and civic and social clubs stagnated. Grangers and farmer's institutes needed books in their work, and membership and attendance declined. While men and women in the cities were helped to become leaders in every line of business and all professions, through use of the resources of city libraries, the people of the country had to struggle along with the few books they could buy. As the reading habit was dying out and country people began to believe there was nothing in books for them, fewer and fewer books were bought, homes were without them, and there was nothing to relieve the monotony of the winter evenings, or to aid parents in giving their children ideals and in building up character. Schools were poor and when teachers were taxed with not teaching the use of books and developing a taste for good literature, they answered that they could not teach the use of that which they did not have nor could they build up a love for reading when the only books within reach were text-books and those not of the best.

### TRAVELING LIBRARIES

This problem seemed preëminently one to be solved by state governments through legislation and appropriation, so several states took it up. The first means devised was a state system of traveling libraries.

In 1893 New York state passed a law creating a system of traveling libraries and made appropriation for the support of the

same under the administration of the State Library. Soon other states organized similar systems under the administration of either their state libraries or library commissions which had previously been created to further the establishment of free libraries and to aid those already established. These traveling library systems were at first all operated upon what is now termed the "fixed group plan." The books bought were divided into small groups of fifty and placed in little bookcases. These groups were sent out from the State House to communities throughout the state, some local person taking charge of the distribution of the books and agreeing to be responsible for their safe return. When a community was through with one group it was returned and another sent. A fee of five dollars a year was charged, the state paid transportation and libraries could be exchanged as often as desired. These groups were "fixed"; that is, after a group was made up, the books in it were never changed, but when it was returned from one community it was sent to another just as it was.

These collections were made up with the idea of having something in each for every age and every taste, and great care was taken to maintain a supposedly ideal proportion of books on history, religion, useful arts, etc. Many articles were written about "books for all of the people," and many thought the problem of rural reading was solved. Soon it began to be apparent that in a collection of fifty books something for everybody could not be included, and if there was something for every one there was not much for anyone.

"The books don't suit," the farmers began to complain. "Country people have not the reading habit and won't read good books," grumbled the managers of the traveling libraries. In some of the states those in charge of the libraries began to wonder whether "farmers is farmers," and, if "farmers is farmers," whether charcoal burners, fishermen, lumbermen, miners, Swedes, Poles, Hungarians, Quakers, immigrants, and native sons have the same "group" tastes in reading. Several states abandoned the fixed group plan and began to select books for each group to meet the needs of the individual community to which it was to be sent. This was called the open shelf plan. Even those states which retained the fixed group system—because it seemed in a large measure to meet the needs of their more homogeneous population—

added an "open shelf" collection from which books could be drawn to fit unusual conditions. Yearly subscription fees were made lower. In some states no fee was charged but the communities paid transportation. It seemed that the libraries as then constituted should be satisfactory to every one but it soon became apparent that the census report as to the character of the population of any given community was not a reliable guide as to what the people were going to like to read because, with a curiously human twist, an individual lumberman as often longed for a book on geology, or a duck farmer for a book on the relation of science to religion as does the janitor in a twenty-story city apartment house crave a book on poultry raising. As one old farmer said:

Seems like folks down to the State House think because I'm a farmer I want to spend my nights reading about fertilizers. Bless your heart, I don't. I want to git out and above fertilizers. I want to read something, say about them stars I see every night. I would admire to know 'em all by name and when one of them comes peekin' around the corn crib to say, "Why there comes old man Jupiter," familiar and knowing like.

#### TRAVELING LIBRARIANS

It became evident that if the traveling libraries were to be successful the state must employ someone to visit the communities desiring libraries, and find out what they liked and what they needed; and so there came into the field the traveling librarian. Now, this librarian works under many names, but under every name she and her work are about the same. "She" is used advisedly, because, like the inhabitants of Massachusetts, the traveling librarian is mostly of the feminine gender. Someone has said that women have a larger faith and a more boundless enthusiasm. Perhaps that is the reason why women are chosen as traveling librarians, for these two qualities are absolutely indispensable in the library work of the open country.

It is the work of this librarian to go out in the rural districts and small towns, live among the people and get to know them, bring to their consciousness the value of books and tell them how they may be had, find the right person to take charge of the library locally and the best place to locate it, keep alive the interest in books, see that the best use is made of those sent, find out whether the best books for that community have been sent and if they are not being used to discover the reason and apply a remedy. Her

occupations and duties are many and varied. In the morning she meets with the school teachers and they talk over "best books for children," and use of books in the school. At noon she talks to the managers of a glass factory in a forlorn little glass town where no one lives but those who work in the factory, and those who work for those who work in the factory. If she has a persuasive tongue they will let her talk to the men, if she will be brief, and perhaps one of these managers will volunteer to go along with her and "knock the block off" any of them that want to make trouble and won't listen.

In the afternoon she meets with a mothers' club and they discuss the value of ownership of books, and what constitutes a good book. That night some fishermen gather in a storm-shaken hut, and listen to a talk on books, and volunteer in their turn many curious bits of sea lore and thoughts bred by the lonely hours at their work.

An after-dinner speech at a banquet on Saturday night is followed by a talk in a little country church on Sunday morning on "books in the home." A Virginia reel at a harvest home is followed by a meeting with the county board of freeholders to show them "why." The layman will never know how many of these county freeholders do hail from Missouri.

To reach the people she must visit the most remote and out of the way places, for the farther from the big centres the people live and the harder they are to reach the more they need books and the more they appreciate the work of the librarian.

Thrilling stories are told of experiences in the West with forest fires, and forced drives through forests behind unbroken bronchos to find a safe place to sleep. Just a part of the day's work in other states are the drives to the county fair in the same conveyance as the pig which is to be given as a prize to the one that can guess his weight, and the discovery that the pig has whiled away the tedious hour by gnawing the bottom ruffle from the librarian's new summer dress—and her best dress at that; and rides through the beating snow when every feather is torn from the only winter hat.

One worker had the hall in which she was speaking literally burned over her head. The people, although told of the fire, did not see it and were therefore not frightened, and were so much interested in books they would not hurry, although the chairman kept his hand firmly planted in the middle of the librarian's back

and kept repeating monotonously: "You must go out quietly but quickly!" While she, between answering questions as to how Johnny, who only liked the "Motor Boys," could be induced to read something better, or how tomboy Mary could be persuaded to read at all, was protesting that her coat was a new coat and could not be left behind. The remainder of the story, of how no one would stay to watch the fire, of how all adjourned down the road to the schoolhouse to finish the discussion, will not readily be believed by those accustomed to more indifferent audiences.

The demand for libraries grew by leaps and bounds when it was found that an effort was being made to suit the people of each community. The response to the personal work of the librarian, contrary to the expectations and prophecies of many, was immediate and gratifying.

More than any other people in the world, the people of the open country want something better for their children than they have had for themselves. They demanded books when it was brought to their attention that the schools were poor without them, and that books were needed to develop their children's minds and build up their characters.

#### DEMAND IN THE COUNTRY FOR GOOD BOOKS

Contrary to the belief of many, it has been found that country people like an unusually good class of books. It is much easier to awaken in them a desire for good books than it is to interest the city dweller. They are eager to hear of what is the best for their children, to listen to talks about books for the schools, and quick to respond with: "I knew there must be something wrong with the kind of books my boy and girl were reading, but they seemed the best I could get."

Someone asked what books country people like. Why, the same as the people who live in the city. The miners in the northern part of one state read Jokai's *Black Diamonds* until it was held together only by a rubber band; the fishermen in the same state read and re-read Ingersoll's *Book of the Ocean* until they knew it by heart. Thirty copies of *Anne of Green Gables* cannot supply the demand; almost every letter from a librarian of a traveling library asks that something of Churchill's be put in if possible. Mrs. Wister's translations bring comfort and pleasure to many a dear

old countryman and woman. *Les Miserables* is recommended by the country ministers and becomes most popular. *Leather Stocking Tales* keeps many a man reading until midnight, and his wife complains it's hard to get him up to milk the cows. One small state owns more than fifteen thousand children's books and hardly a dozen are to be found in the office at any one time. In this same state more than two thousand books on agriculture are continually in circulation, and the shelves on domestic economy are always empty. Electricity, airships and child study vie as popular subjects with Mexico, moving picture operation and proportional representation. The school teachers are most eager for books that will make their work better. Many a country minister testifies that his work is easier and more efficient since he can get books.

#### THE PLACE FOR THE TRAVELING LIBRARY

It is one of the duties of the traveling librarian to find the best places in a community to station these libraries. They are sent to general stores, grange halls, town halls, school houses, drug stores, churches, private residences and many other places, but every person or association in charge of one must promise that the library will be kept open to everyone in the community.

The general merchandise store is the very best place a library can be sent, because every one goes there at some time, and the merchant generally welcomes the library because it helps bring him trade. One refused, saying he had neither the time nor the room to fool with books, but he wrote a month later asking to be "put on to a library" because a man who had a store three miles away had one and his customers were going there. From this station over 4,000 books a year are circulated, and the wife of this merchant says she buys her hats with the fines from the books that are kept over time. He, like many other local librarians for traveling libraries, has fixed up a little reading room in connection with the library, and people can gather there and look over the books and talk together.

#### SPECIAL LOANS TO INDIVIDUALS

As soon as it was understood that books could be had on special subjects, the demand for them was so great that there were often not enough books of general interest in a collection to satisfy a

community. A plan was devised of sending books wanted by individuals as special loans, without charge, in addition to general collections. The special loan goes through the traveling library, where there is one; where there is none the individual can write in and the book will be sent to him direct. Since the parcel post law has applied to books this service has become most efficient and not expensive. Large libraries are liberal in lending books to those in charge of traveling libraries, to be in turn loaned to country dwellers. One man studying coöperation among farmers boasted that he had books from five libraries, and that one of these was the Library of Congress.

This special loan work has become one of the largest factors in the development of library work with rural districts, and enables students and readers in the open country to get books they need when they need them. With the inauguration of this service traveling libraries began to be of real value and to approximate in the country the work that was being done for cities by urban libraries. The requests come from doctors, lawyers, teachers, farmers, glass blowers, housewives, day laborers, politicians, and in fact from all sorts and conditions of men and women, and the loans go to fishing villages, lumber camps, isolated farm homes, factories, granges, churches, schools, foreign colonies, and every kind of place where men and women, boys and girls, live and work and have ambition and need help. The subjects demanded range from how to raise bullfrogs to railroad management, from a treatise on Saint Paul and Christianity in modern life to the origin of chickens and how many eggs they lay in the wild state.

From a gathering of seventy-six men and boys, who sat with unchanging faces for an hour and listened to a talk on the practical value of books, more than forty letters were received inquiring about books on special subjects. Were there really books on everyday subjects? Would they really be sent to them? Could they get books that would tell the difference between plant lice and caterpillars? A foolish question that may seem, but it meant the spraying and saving of a man's crop.

A boy of fifteen wrote that he was full of ambition for an education, but he had had to leave school. He wanted a book on "How to dance without an instructor," one on "Raising bantams," one on "What it means to be educated," and "a book that's as

interesting as the Motor Boys, which you said wasn't no good." Since that time he has read *Widow O'Callaghan's Boys*, *David Copperfield*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Treasure Island*, Scudder's *Life of Washington*, along with books on fruit growing, potato raising, and moving picture operation. One boy wrote, "We used to think we couldn't be nothing but farmers, but now we can get books and be anything we want, and we think maybe it's nice to be farmers."

In the last state-wide debate contest in one state a back county country high school stayed in the contest to the finals because, as the principal wrote, "we could get the books we needed."

One man who was a country plumber wanted to be an illustrator and could not afford to go "even into the Natural History Museum in New York, or to the Bronx Zoo to study from life," so he wanted books. He wanted most unusual books. He got them, and after a year or two the librarian was startled to see a picture by him on the cover of a magazine, so little had she really believed that anything but pleasure to the man would come from it.

#### CORRESPONDENCE-REFERENCE SERVICE

Answering reference questions for people in the country was a sequence to sending out books on special subjects. The questions so asked and answered settle many a country store argument, decide many debates, and help many women make their club and grange papers interesting.

What are some of the questions asked? Just ordinary questions as to how to make and do, and questions we all have asked or thought of, that often come up in arguments, or that newspapers and magazines suggest, etc. What is the meaning of the black in the German flag? What year was there a snow in June? Does the Constitution of Oklahoma contain the grandfather clause? What is the story of the song "Loch Lomond"? Why is New Jersey said not to belong to the Union? What is the Christ of the Andes? What causes the slides in the Culebra cut? Is the water higher on the Pacific side of the canal than on the Atlantic side? Did Cleopatra have red hair? Were the scarabs worn by the ancient Egyptians petrified beetles? How can we clean oil paintings? Do deer lose their horns in the winter? What does Armageddon mean and where did the word originate? How can you make tomato jelly jell?

### TOWNSHIP CENTERS

In some states the traveling librarian assembles the librarians of the traveling libraries of one township or one district and talks to them about books, finds out what they are doing and what they think should be sent to their communities. This led in one township to the books being all sent to the central village and distributed from there to the other communities. There is a reading room and collection of reference books and a head librarian in the central library. There is a local librarian in each of the other communities. The librarian for the branch selects the books for her community from the main collection, with the aid of the head librarian. These books are changed from time to time so that the local collection is kept fresh. They say nearly every one who comes to the village that has the main library visits it, and as this village is the trading centre most of the people in the township come there weekly. This brings the whole township together and, as the minister wrote, "the library in this township is the main occupation now in the evenings and it is bringing about a community spirit." A township clubhouse, where dances and sociables were held, was soon the outcome. This township contains 56 square miles. Many townships are following its lead.

### COUNTY LIBRARIES

In large states, county libraries are being established. The smaller the unit the better the work is done, as the people can come more directly and more often in contact with the librarian and the main collection of books.

### BOOK WAGONS

In some counties and even in some states book wagons have been routed. These wagons are loaded with books and cover a regular route. Stops are made at farmhouses, where there is much pleasant conversation, and books for each member of the family are chosen and requests made for books to be sent on the next trip. This service has met with much success.

### COÖPERATION

Large city and town libraries are helping solve the problem of country reading by sending books to small communities immediately surrounding them. The ideal condition is that there shall be a

library and reading room within the reach of every citizen, therefore large libraries are being encouraged to so serve villages near them.

The efficiency of traveling libraries when administered by granges called attention to the fact that rural libraries, to accomplish their object should coöperate with other agencies for rural betterment; so traveling librarians began to study these agencies and work through and with them,—the state department of agriculture, the state experiment station, the extension department of the state college of agriculture, the grange, the state board of health, and the state department of education.

The teachers' institutes afford a great opportunity for getting in touch with the rural school teachers and farmers' institutes are one of the very best means of reaching country people as a whole as institute workers are very ready to help and anxious to coöperate. The county agricultural agent becomes in many places a real library agent advising and introducing the librarian and seeing that people get the books. So through coöperation the traveling library system develops into a real factor in country life.

Some one has asked the object of all this work.

It is that "each man and woman, boy and girl, shall have his chance and that the state shall maintain a library which can be used by all of the people who desire books for reading or study, for recreation, inspiration or information, and shall offer a library service that shall make it possible for the most remote community, the most isolated workers, to have books to use as freely as they would have if they were living in the city." It is the goal of the library workers in the open country that every man, woman and child in the rural communities shall get the book that is to help them individually, and that the rising generation shall have the reading habit and demand these things for themselves.